

DISSECTING THE HEART

**SECULAR PSYCHOLOGY, SPIRITUAL WARFARE,
AND TRUE THEOLOGY**

DAVID POWLISON

**ANNOTATED, EDITED, AND INTRODUCED
BY PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS**

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Dissecting the Heart: Secular Psychology, Spiritual Warfare, and True Theology
Annotated, Edited, and Introduced by Pierce Taylor Hibbs
Foreword by Paul David Tripp

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FOREWORD

As I read this wonderful and important collection of David Powlison's lectures, I was flooded with fond and personal memories. I thought of the summer when David and I spent some weeks together on the third floor of the CCEF building, cataloging and discussing biblical passages on the heart. I thought of the long flight together for ministry in South Korea, where we discussed the gospel for hours as David sat next to me, with his yellow legal pad, taking notes. My mind went to traveling across India by train with Raju Abraham, as we discussed Hinduism and Christianity. I remembered, not so fondly, both of us getting sick in India as we faced two more weeks of ministry in South Korea. And I remembered so many spontaneous conversations about life, the gospel, and counseling that took place in the hallways of CCEF.

David and I really were the odd couple. We were remarkably different but brought together by God's sovereign plan and unified by grace and the gospel. How would I characterize my relationship with David? First, David was my friend. You couldn't be around him without growing to love him. He encouraged me and strengthened me in ways I'm sure he never knew. Second, David was my colleague. Ed Welch, David, and I together gave ourselves to doing our best to give biblical counseling a theology, methodology, and a ministry apologetic personality. We knew that biblical counseling should not be rooted in counseling centers but centered in the church, so David and I traveled to churches across the United States and around the world, teaching biblical counseling fundamentals. Third, David was my mentor. I first sat in his class as a pastor, not knowing that we would work together for twenty years. In that class, he taught theology in a way I had never heard it taught before. But he mentored me not just as a student, but throughout those twenty years. One way I have characterized that mentorship throughout the years is this: if I saw a circle, David would look at the very same circle and see forty circles inside of it. He was a major influence in developing the gospel thinking that lives in all the books I have written since.

I could share so many more experiences of my ministry life with David, some very serious and others downright hilarious. But here's what I will say for now: David and I laughed and prayed, taught and discussed, thought out loud and sat in silence together, and all of those experiences are packed away



in my heart as one of God's good gifts to me. So, I am beyond honored to have the privilege of writing the foreword to this wonderfully insightful and deeply needed book. As I read it, I kept saying to myself, "The church needs this, the church needs this." I thought, "This should be assigned reading at every evangelical seminary." There are many things to say about the book you're about to read, but one thing for sure that needs to be said is that this is the most insightful biblical critique of a psychologized culture and its influence on the church that you will ever read. The manner in which David lays bare the shallow nature of psychology's "depth" when compared to the surgical precision of Scripture's excavation of the depths of the thoughts and intentions of the heart is a vital contribution to the church's gospel apologetic in this generation. I am convinced that no one has thought about these issues with the kind of conceptual, exegetical, and experiential depth and clarity that David did. If psychology is the street-level religion of Western culture, if even our casual conversations with one another are marked by psychological terminology, and if we have handed the "deeper" issues of the human struggle to experts outside of the church, then David's words of wisdom about theology and psychology desperately need to be heard.

Then there is the issue of demons, deliverance, and spiritual warfare. As I have traveled around the world, serving churches of every kind and fellowshiping with God's people, I have encountered consistent confusion when it comes to what the Bible has to say about this important biblical topic. The mention of spiritual warfare often conjures up in people's minds a scene that would fit well within a B-grade horror movie. To many, spiritual warfare is a very unusual spiritual phenomenon, one they are afraid of but don't think they will ever encounter. Maybe the clearest example of this confusion and misunderstanding is how people understand Ephesians 6. To many, Ephesians 6 is an abrupt change of topic. In chapters four and five, Paul is delineating what it looks like to live out of the gospel in all the areas we will encounter in our daily lives. Then all of a sudden, he switches to talking about dark spiritual powers and arming yourself for spiritual warfare. Many people fail to see the deeply important connection between chapters four, five, and six. In Ephesians 6, Paul is not changing the topic at all. Rather, he is summarizing the instructions he has just given. It's as if Paul is saying, "Every dimension of life I have just spoken about is also the scene of a spiritual war." Spiritual war is far from an unusual thing. It takes place in all the mundane locations we live in every day. This side of eternity, life is one big spiritual war.

So, David's discussion of demons, deliverance, and spiritual war is very



important. How can you not be thankful for this section of this book that is marked by David's ability to critique places where the thinking of the church has gone wrong, while he carefully lays out the biblical alternative? His critiques are thorough and sharp, while at the same time being careful, respectful, and fair. Here, David reminds us that we never come to Scripture empty-handed. We always bring with us assumptions that have the power to misshape our understanding of the transformative wisdom God has lovingly recorded and preserved for us. So, we need to pray for grace to come to the Bible with a humble, open, willing, and submissive heart, so we don't make the Bible say what we want it to say or what we think it should say. And this grace is ours in Jesus.

I want to say one other thing before I make some closing comments. David's exegesis and application of Psalm 10 is so rich, convicting, and encouraging that it is worth the price of the book. This section is a shining example of how we should approach, read, understand, and apply any part of the Bible we are reading. Here, we are reminded that the Bible is essentially the story of one central character: Jesus. The hope of the Bible is way deeper than advanced theological knowledge. The hope of the Bible is Jesus and the rescuing, forgiving, transforming, empowering, and delivering grace he gives to everyone who puts their trust in him. David reminds us that if you can look into Psalm 10 and not see Jesus, you have sadly missed the hope of this precious piece of God's word to you.

I am very thankful for this collection of David Powlison's exegetical and apologetic wisdom. This is not light reading. It will stretch you and challenge your assumptions. Don't attempt to read it quickly. Settle in, slow down, and dig deep. You will be glad you did. Here is biblical wisdom at its finest.

Thank you, David. I am honored to call you my friend.

—Paul David Tripp
3/27/26

THE HEART OF DAVID POWLISON

David Arthur Cameron Powlison (1949–2019)

SUMMER

Growing up in Hawaii, a surfer and an All-American swimmer, David earned himself the nickname “Dave the Wave.” One particular summer day on the Jersey shore he was a body surfing wave-wonder. Storm surf had churned up a great break, but sadly many people found themselves under rather than over the waves. But not Dave the Wave! He was in his element catching wave after wave, as sleek as a seal. Suddenly he was the only one riding a perfect left break. On the beach, the people around me watching took note. He kept going, and going, and going! Finally cast up on the shore he clambered out—a skinny white kid from No-wheres-ville. “From whence came this ‘wave wonder?’” they seemed to ask with their stares and whispers as he walked back up the beach. Did David Arthur Cameron Powlison bow slightly to his fans before we snickered our way back to our towels and headed home? Yes, I think he did!

FALL

Hawaii, where David grew up, was a floral world—bougainvillea, plumeria, pikake, hibiscus, and coconut palms. But in the fall on the East Coast, yellow, red, and orange maple leaves energized him. He loved their canopy overhead on a sunny day in Pennsylvania or New England, or their crunch underfoot on Halloween night while trick-or-treating around the neighborhood with the kids. Fall also meant Seminary classes starting, the challenge of shaping and developing young minds with a new course, or a seminar, or a conference to attend as speaker. His mind was a waterfall of ideas, applying God’s word to life. Writing articles and editorials for the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* kept him up late at night. His middle name should have been “Tweak.” He was always tweaking every word and sentence so as to “speak truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). His passion was making each sentence fresh and with just the right touch of nuance. Tapping “Send” was the bane of his life, but it brought his bosses, editors, publishers, and wife great rejoicing!

After that miracle “Send,” he would be out the door and into the autumn air for a walk, then home to his favorite Patrick O’Brien novel, a cookie, and a cup of Earl Grey tea by the wood stove, or maybe an Eagles game before bed.

“How do you spell relief?” he would sigh. “B-E-D.”

WINTER

For David, growing up in Hawaii, winter wasn’t winter. Well, it was, but one could still go swimming, eat papaya, walk around in an aloha shirt, or go barefoot to school, and never shovel snow. How different for him when he met snowflakes on the East Coast in the winter of 1968. It took him a year of sloshing about Harvard Square in frozen moccasins before he realized he better buy some boots.

When he became the father of three, he helped with boots—boots before going out and boots when they came back in. Boots took us to the hills at Westminster Seminary or rural Vermont to sled, ski, and snowboard. And then at night to see galaxies and stars: the Milky Way, Pleiades, Orion, and Cassiopeia—David’s old friends. At Christmastime, Hawaii and East Coast met and shook hands for the annual “around-the-house Powli-people run” in bathing suits. No boots—just barefoot in the snow! David’s love of fun and adventure blessed our family. And this adventuresome spirit moved him to push into all sorts of varied Christian and secular counseling worlds, taking biblical counseling to the world through the Biblical Counseling Coalition and various international speaking engagements: Brazil, the UK, France, the Czech Republic, India, Africa, and Korea.

SPRING

In Hawaii, it is always spring. So much warmth and beauty, lavish rainforest growth, wind and squalls blowing color changes over the ocean. And in New England things melt.

In spring as a youth David traveled over the mountains from Honolulu to Lanikai, where his grandparents lived on the windward side of Oahu. Designed by his grandfather, Hilltop House, built into a rock outcropping, claimed a 360-degree view of ocean, islands, mountains and sky. During years of teenage rebellion far from this Hawaiian home—with its beauty and family love—the place remained like a song in him. The spring melt started in his heart at college as he read Dostoyevsky, Tolkien, and others; heard the gospel for the first

time through his friend Bob; and experienced the fallout of relationships that did not last. David's heart melted from a heart of stone into one of flesh at the age of twenty-six, when he gave his life to Christ. On that day he felt light, peace, and a sense of arriving home. I am sure Hilltop House was very much part of that feeling.

David passed into Christ's arms at the age of sixty-nine, after twenty years of ups and downs with cancer and heart surgeries. I saw him grow in wisdom and stature as he participated in the sufferings of Christ during those years. This verse from Daniel 12:3 often makes me think of him and the legacy he left to us: "Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens above, and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever."

Like stars, there is beauty and glory in wisdom. Pierce Taylor Hibbs had the brainstorm to illuminate some of David's lectures and teachings in this unique book. Through his annotations of several of David's lectures, he shines light on aspects of David's character and teaching genius, making his ideas and thoughts more accessible to many. I am thankful to Pierce for participating in "leading many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever" by being a mouthpiece for David in this way!

—Nancy Powlison, February, 2026

INTRODUCTION

David Powlison (1949–2019) was one of the most incisive thinkers and “dissectors” of the human heart that I’ve had the pleasure of knowing. Ever since he entered into glory in 2019 after battling pancreatic cancer, I have found myself reading and re-reading his material, listening and re-listening to his lectures. More times than I can count, I’ve said to myself, “I wish we could have David for just one more day.” His family and friends would say the same on much more intimate levels, and with good reason. David’s life exuded kindness, grace, sympathy, and wisdom. Simple encounters with him became pivot points in people’s lives. Allow me to share just two of my own.

When I used to teach writing at Westminster Theological Seminary (where I now serve as Senior Writer), we would engage with professors to help their students improve their writing or better understand their professors’ expectations for an assignment. At one point, my colleague and I went to ask David about an assignment for his “Theology and Secular Psychology” course. We found him just about to begin a lecture in what was then Rust Auditorium. In the midst of swarms of students asking him questions, he turned to us and said, “Oh, no. I’m in trouble. It’s the writing police.” We laughed and asked him how we could help some of his students with their first writing assignment. He paused only a moment to give a very brief but intentional answer. “Well . . . we want to bless people.” I thought there was more coming, so I waited. But that was it. It was all he said and all he needed to say: “We want to bless people.”

It would be easy to pass that off as casual Christian parlance. But it wasn’t for David. He had a way of bringing others to see things with distinctly biblical eyes. I found myself stumped. “Hmm. What *would* bless these students?” The answer we came up with wasn’t earth-shattering. But David’s question was. I can’t tell you how many times since then I’ve paused when a question has come to me and asked, “What would *bless* people? What would bring this person the light of God’s presence for a concrete moment? How can I be a conduit of God’s goodness and grace *right now*?” Small questions make big ripples.

The second memory I have of David is sitting in his third-story office at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF). David’s wife, Nan, described that office as something of a tree house. Outside each window were foliage, wind, and wildness. It was a perch in the canopy, a good place for

deep conversations. David had invited me there because I wanted to write an article for the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* on giving words of counsel.¹ As a writer and editor, I thought much about words and how powerful they were. David liked the idea so much he invited me to make it a two-part article, and he called me into his office to chat about it. In the dark and quiet space of his tree-house office, we marveled that God had given us the gift of language in ways that reflected him—in mystery and majesty. How could it be that the Word would give us words and then show us how to season them with grace (Col. 4:6; Eph. 4:29)? How beautifully humble of God to call us to speak *after* him! We both chuckled with joy at Vern Poythress’s observation (which has been life-altering for me) that language is not just a human thing; it’s a divine thing. God speaks to himself, not just to us.² It was overwhelmingly exciting and inspiring to think about what it means for the triune God to give us words of counsel in Scripture, so that we might give words of counsel to others. I’ll never forget that time in his office. It seems like decades ago. I had no idea that he would enter into glory just six years later.

Since then, myself and a number of my friends have been visiting and revisiting David’s work. He was a wordsmith, and I learned much about word-crafting from him. There are so many one-liners I’ll carry with me for the rest of my days. And that’s because he was artistic—not just thoughtful—about the way he communicated. “There is always some sun around which the planet of our lives turns.” Pause and let that imagery work on you. “Trust begets obedience.” Just three words to chew on, but it’ll take decades to swallow them. “God is the decisive actor and foundational factor in the drama”—lest we think we are the heroes of our own lives. David’s words landed like robins in the nest of my memory. They built homes from grass blades of experience. They settled in. They stayed.

What I loved most about David, and what I believe you will see in this book, is his *heart* for Christ. A heart for Christ is both ecstatic about who God is and perceptive of what happens when we run from him. David always seemed to balance both. Whenever I spoke with him, I thought, “Here is a worshiper, a lover of God who is enraptured by grace.” He helped me feel close to God by rehearsing God’s goodness with me. But he also perceived where

1. This was published in two parts: “Words of Counsel—Part 1: A Biblical-Theological Foundation,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 27, no. 2 (2013): 51–64; and “Words of Counsel—Part 2: Letting Words Work,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 27, no. 3 (2013): 27–36.

2. Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Crossway, 2009), 18.

secular culture and psychology were missing things and misleading people. In one of the chapters in this book, he talks about secular psychologists as chess players who think there are only black pieces on the board. They are missing the whole other side of the game! That's a cutting critique. But David showed it was true by uncovering the short-sighted and self-serving goals voiced by people who were running away from God—whether they were psychologists, counselors, or everyday sufferers. True freedom, true identity, true joy, true purpose, true healing—these things come only from the God of Scripture. And that God is always confronting us, asking for our heart . . . and every drop of blood running through it.

When I think of David now, I remember him as one of my favorite heart-dissectors. He knew his Bible well, and he used it to cut down to the core of who people are and how they work—both on paper and in person. He taught me how to dissect the hearts of others by their words and actions. But far more important: he taught me how the Spirit dissects *my* heart, which is always in need of surgery. And praise God: the Spirit of Christ is good with a scalpel.

ABOUT THE BOOK

What you hold in your hands is a very special book, even amongst the other things David has written. Why? Many people who knew David, and those who have heard of him since his passing, wish they could have had him speak directly *to them*. They would love to be recipients of David's counsel. That, in fact, is what you have in this book. These are transcribed lectures where David was addressing his students in the quiet of a lecture hall. He was communicating face-to-face. He was conversing. He was exploring topics in real time. *You* are now in the same position as those students. You are listening in to deep conversations about topics with a pulse: heart motivations, psychological theories and therapies, spiritual warfare, the relevance of theology, the Christ who lives in the Psalms, the cutting and healing word of God. What you are about to read is a treasure trove of wisdom mined over decades from the quarry of Scripture. I have no doubt you will marvel at the gems you find. They still glitter. But more than that, David would have you marvel at the *God behind the glitter*. David sought to explore what truly God-centered counsel looked, felt, and sounded like. So as you read, worship the one true Counselor, who alone addresses the madness of the human heart (Eccl. 9:3).

This book is made up of lectures that David Powlison delivered at Westminster Theological Seminary over the course of his career. They have been

transcribed and edited for the best reading experience. They have also been heavily annotated to fill in background information and provide snippets from David's other writings. I wanted readers to have this book as an invitation into David's corpus. I have taken pains to make sure every note is useful and adds value to the discussion. But I have also sought, with every change or edit, never to add anything to David's message. I wanted only to connect the dots that his initial listeners may have been able to connect more easily. In this, I retained David's conversational approach. That is what will make you feel like an insider as you read, as if you were hiding in the back of the lecture hall.

Lastly, I wanted to offer a word about the footnotes. I know that not all readers are familiar with the biblical counseling movement, secular psychology and psychiatry, and the theological or spiritual conflicts that gave rise to some of David's writing. Psychological terminology, Reformed doctrine, and the theological importance of what David communicates can get lost on us. To aid readers with that and help them see just how momentous David's work continues to be in our "psychological age," I have added annotations that do three things: (1) explain terms or provide background; (2) point to David's work in his other books, giving readers other paths to explore; and (3) comment on the relevance of David's claims and arguments today. Since the original lectures were delivered orally and had no footnotes per se, the only footnotes you find in this book are my additions. I pray that these notes are a blessing to you and bring you to explore David's work more deeply as you're able. I promise it is worth your time. My goal with the annotations was to make this book as accessible as possible for the widest breadth of Christian readers. David once quoted John Piper for saying that true biblical counseling *must* happen inside the church.³ I believe that after reading this book, you will understand why.

The detailed work that has gone into this book has been a joyful and illuminating act of love. I hope you receive it that way. May the God of grace and glory, whose word always brings the best counsel, bless your reading and bring your heart ever nearer to the Spirit, who both cuts us to the core and gives us much more than we could ever dream up for ourselves: unending life with the living God. Until the Lord returns, let the heart dissection continue.

3. John Piper wrote, "According to Hebrews, perseverance of the saints is a community project, therefore we need biblical counseling as the lifeblood of church life. . . . Perseverance is a community project. I say it again, because this is the reason counseling *must* be in the church." This comes from Piper's article, "God's Glory Is the Goal of Biblical Counseling," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 20 (Winter 2002): 13, 17. Powlison quotes this in his posthumously published book *The Pastor as Counselor: The Call for Soul Care* (Crossway, 2021), 59.



SECULAR PSYCHOLOGY

PART 1

THE DEPTH OF MOTIVATION

A Biblical Perspective

How is it that Christianity is typically thought of? How does Christianity approach people? What does Christianity have to do with human experience, with behavior in life?¹ You tend to get two extremes.

On the one side, it's externalistic or moralistic. It can be a kind of candy coating of good behavior for good people, for nice boys and girls. And church is a place where people put on their Sunday best not only clothes-wise, but in terms of the masks they wear. The church is a superficial place where proper behavior is the central concern. That was my idea of what Christianity was as I was growing up, which I found ultimately despicable as a rebellious teenager.

The other side is internal. Christianity is thought of as spiritual things, things that are somehow "off there in the airy-fairy." These are deep inner experiences. If the first side is a super *externalism*, the other is a super *internalism*, where there's nothing you can get out of Christian faith rationally. Faith is just experiences of the Spirit. It's "trust in the Lord." It's "let go and let God." It's "movements of the Spirit." So, in the end you've got this mystical kind of experience (internalism) and this social conformity (externalism).

1. In this lecture, Powlison gets into the specifics of Scripture and human life as integral to authentic Christianity. He often used the language of "sanity" to refer to what Christianity does at its best. For instance, "The madness in our hearts generates warped spectra. But God sees all things in bright, clear light—and this God is the straightener of crooked thoughts. He makes madmen sane." *Seeing with New Eyes: Counseling and the Human Condition through the Lens of Scripture* (P&R, 2003), 10; "The only sanity is to know Him-who-is. Anything else perpetuates our insanity." *Speaking Truth in Love: Counsel in Community* (New Growth, 2005), 169; "The core insanity of the human heart is that we violate the first great commandment. We will love anything, except God, unless our madness is checked by grace." *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (New Growth, 2010), 290; "The God of the universe calls us to love him with utter devotion. When I forget my Shepherd, I orient my life around another god and love some good gift more than the Giver. . . . I am commanded to the sanity of love, and it lays my heart bare." *Good & Angry: Redeeming Anger, Irritation, Complaining, and Bitterness* (New Growth, 2016), 164; "In Christ, in order to sin, you must relapse into temporary insanity, into forgetfulness. It is your worst cancer, your most crippling disability, your most treacherous enemy, your deepest distress." *God's Grace in Your Suffering* (Crossway, 2018), 80; "Hearts may be unsearchable and insane, but the word of God reveals the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12–13)." *The Pastor as Counselor: The Call for Soul Care* (Crossway, 2021), 33–34.

In between those false caricatures of Christianity is all the interesting stuff. It's what motivates people—why we do what we do.² It's how people affect each other, how parents affect children, how friends affect friends, how husbands affect wives. It's about sexual relations and class relations and the effects of oppression. It's why we wear masks, why we're defensive, and why we try to put on a good front. It's about how depressed people think and what kinds of backgrounds homosexuals have. Christian faith is actually all this nitty-gritty, juicy stuff about what people are really like. That's what's left over in the middle, between the externalism and the internalism. And that middle territory is really what secular psychology has grabbed ahold of.³

2. *Motive* is one of the defining themes in Powlison's thought. He would write in 1988, "The questions of motivation must be addressed in the same detail with which biblical counseling has addressed questions of behavior." *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context*, 241. He went on in the same book to say, "Motivational dynamics do not simply operate within or between persons. The human heart has to do with God. So when the Bible describes the desires that obviously play within our souls and rule our lives, it does not portray them as hard-wired psychological or physiological givens: as needs, instincts, drives, longings, wishes. It speaks of them as morally freighted vis-a-vis God, as moral-covenantal choices: we are ruled either by cravings of the flesh or by repentance-faith-obedience to God's desires" (288). It is likely that motive is such a prevalent theme for him because "motive" is one of our terms for the biblical language of "heart." The heart is what propels us to think, act, speak, worship, work, and play. Herman Bavinck says, "All of our rational and volitional life has its point of origin in the heart and is governed by it." *The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to the Reformed Confession* (Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 3. "All rational and volitional life" means all that we think and all that we desire. According to Scripture, the heart is the epicenter for everything we do. And God wants our whole heart (Deut. 6:5). Powlison used the language of "heart" throughout his work. In a 1995 article, he wrote, "Heart" is the most comprehensive biblical term for what determines our life direction, behavior, thoughts, etc. See Proverbs 4:23, Mark 7:21–23, Hebrews 4:12f, etc. The metaphor of 'circumcision or uncircumcision of heart' is similar to 'idols of the heart,' in that an external religious activity is employed to portray the inward motivational dynamics which the outward act reflects." "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair,'" *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 13, no. 2 (Winter 1995): 36. In other places, Powlison uses the language of "motive" because that is far more popular in secular circles. But the basic question remains the same: what is driving your life in a given direction? This affects *everything*. "Why do people do what they do? An 'answer' to this question anchors every theory of human personality, and every attempt to fix what ails the human race. One's view of motivation will align and color every detail of theory and practice." *Seeing with New Eyes*, 129.

3. This is another one of Powlison's major teachings. Secular psychology and psychiatry, along with today's prevalent therapies, have taken over what he would come to call "the heartland"—all the issues that really make people tick. He would frequently refer to Sigmund Freud's claim that secular psychology provides "secular pastoral workers," a claim reinforced by Perry London. In other words, secular psychologists had begun doing the work of pastors in a godless culture. He addresses this more fully in the next chapter, "Psychologized Culture." But here was a summary statement he made about secular psychology: "Secular psychologies remain major competitors with the church. We face a zoo of systems united by only one thing. At best, 'god' is a comforting auxiliary to the human psychic drama. At worst, he/she/it is a delusion. Lacking God, the human problem (and the power to understand and to solve that problem) is perceived to lie somewhere within or between human beings. Christ died for nothing." *The Biblical Counseling Movement*, 242.

So, the church is left with good boys and girls (externalism) and mystics (internalism), and secular psychology has grabbed the human heart. Reclaiming that link between the inner and outer, between what we're really like and how we behave, needs to be the big agenda for us as Christians. Christians need to reclaim the middle space, since that's what the Bible is really about. And whatever it says about behavior, whatever it says about spiritual experience, it's not somehow detached from all that nitty-gritty reality of how we live, how we think, what we feel like, what motivates us to act.

MOTIVATION

Start with this. Why do we do what we do? What motivates people? What motivates us?⁴ I want to start by quoting Albert Einstein. At one point, he made the statement that “the whole of science consists in an extension of everyday thinking.”⁵ That's a pretty interesting comment from somebody who's into nuclear physics. The whole of science is simply an extension of everyday thinking. And as we consider human motivation, everyday thinking is very appropriate. All of us are motivated people. We're bombarded with things that attempt to motivate us.⁶

4. “The human heart—the answer to why we do what we do—must be understood as an active-verb-with-respect-to-God. Climb inside any emotional reaction, any behavioral choice or habit, any cognitive content, any reaction pattern to suffering, and you are meant to hear and see active verbs working out. Love God or anything else. Fear God or anything else. Want God or anything else. Need God or anything else. Hope in God or anything else. Take refuge in God or anything else. Obey God or anything else. Trust God or anything else. Seek God or anything else. Serve God or anything else. The Bible's motivation theory shouts from every page—but it does not look like a motivation theory to those whose gaze has been bent and blinded by sin's intellectual logic.” *The Biblical Counseling Movement*, 289.

5. Einstein originally wrote this in his essay “Physics and Reality,” *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, Vol. 221, no. 3 (March 1936).

6. In one of his more penetrating observations, Powlison points out how this motivation is always bi-directional: either pushing us toward God or away from him. Motivation also has three origin points: inside us (desires), outside us (sociological motives introduced by others), and warped by us (sinful blindness to the bad roots of our own compulsions). Secular psychologists cannot account for or unify these origin points. Only the Bible can. “Human motivation is intrinsic neither to the individual nor to human society. Human motivation is never strictly psychological or psycho-social or psycho-social-somatic. It is not strictly either psychodynamic or sociological or biological or any combination of these. These terms are at best metaphors for components in a unitary phenomenon which is essentially religious or covenantal. Motivation is always God-relational. Thus human motivation is not essentially the sort of unitary species-wide phenomenon that the human sciences pursue. It is encountered and observed in actual life as an intrinsically binary phenomenon: faith or idolatry. The only unitary point in human motives is the old theological construct: human beings are worshipping creatures, willy-nilly. Seeing this, the Bible's view alone can unify the seemingly contradictory elements in the explanation of behavior. The deep question of motivation is not ‘What

Do some simple brainstorming with me. Let's let our inroad be advertising. Think of a typical ad. What motives are being played on? There are a lot of advertisements, for instance, that have to do with sex. People try to sell tires with a half-clothed lady. What do half-clothed ladies and tires have to do with each other? Nothing. But you could sell tires that way. Or how about self-indulgence? "Do you deserve a break today? Yes. You deserve a break." There's some sense of reward there. "You've worked hard; you've earned it. You can take some pleasure and comfort." That's targeting family people. It's always the harried mother, the serious father who's going to be with his kids. And she deserves a break; he deserves a break. "You go out and have fun at McDonald's." There's another species of that: "This Bud's for you." You've worked hard today; now, go and relax. You've earned a good time. There's an appeal to what you deserve, what your rights are, what you want, what you desire. There is a whole slew of those sorts of ads.

Then there's the approach of equating a product with a certain way of life—like a soda and a certain body to go with it. Or drinking this product and having a good time. It's the same way with cigarettes, too. The ads suggest, "You're that type of person."

So, we've got desires as an overarching category. But we've also got status or success or competency. We've got comfort and ease. All these ads affect us and play to the heart. You can see how many different types of human issues are going on here—desire, hedonism (find pleasure, avoid pain), authority. There's a sense in which all of this is about motivation; it's about what controls behavior and authority. That's why I think it's very important in people's lives.

Within motivation, there is always some sense of what is meaningful. A motive, if somebody's going to be moved by it, must be meaningful. And so the whole issue of meaning in life is built upon with motivations.⁷

is motivating me?" The final question is, "Who is the master of this pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior?" In the biblical view, we are religious, inevitably bound to one god or another. People do not have needs. We have masters, lords, gods, be they oneself, other people, valued objects, Satan. The metaphor of an *idolatrous* heart and society capture the fact that human motivation bears an automatic relationship to God: Who, other than the true God, is my god?" Only Scripture can account for all the components of motivation in their God-relatedness. "Idols of the Heart and 'Vanity Fair,'" 39.

7. This is critical for the Christian worldview. Cornelius Van Til wrote, "unless God is back of everything, you cannot find meaning in anything." See "Why I Believe in God," Reformed.org, <https://reformed.org/apologetics/why-i-believe-in-god-by-cornelius-van-til/>. The search for meaning, upon which motives are based, is ultimately a search for God. And yet Paul tells us that God is not far away from each one of us (Acts 17:27). The problem for humanity is not that God cannot be found; it is that rebellious hearts do not want to find him, even though he is in plain sight.

FRAMEWORKS

Let me try to put some of this into a framework. We have a shopping list of different things that motivate people. But what makes a *theory*, a psychological theory, is that you order that list in some way. You take a dozen things that motivate humans, and you put some order to them. All of us have the same data; how we interpret and order it is what matters. So, let me just give four different types of theories that try to take that whole list of motivations and make sense of it.

Building block model. One would be what we might call a building block model of human motivation. The behaviorists would embrace that.⁸ They'd say, "Well, certain things are primary. They're the building blocks. And those things are what we need for bodily sustenance: food, water, and sex."⁹ Those would be put at the bottom as the building blocks. And then everything else would be built on top—the social needs, the status, the accomplishments, the meaning in life. Those would all be considered secondary kinds of motives built upon basic building blocks. Behavioral theory is imposing a certain order

8. *Behaviorism* in the field of psychology argues that humans are conditioned within an environment to acquire and practice certain behaviors. This is an external focus (observable behaviors) rather than an internal focus (thoughts and feelings). For example, if I go to work each day and am offered a cup of coffee at 9:00am, I will "learn the behavior" of drinking caffeinated beverages in the workplace, especially by grasping what happens to me *after* I drink the coffee: more energy! For some behaviorists, there is a hierarchy of learned behaviors. Behaviors regarding bodily sustenance are more foundational or necessary than social or professional behaviors. B. F. Skinner (1904–1990) was perhaps the most well known behaviorist. As Morton Hunt puts it, Skinner believed "all we need to know or can know . . . are the external causes of behavior and the observable results of that behavior." *The Story of Psychology*, up. and rev. ed. (Anchor Books, 2007), 305. In plain language, Skinner developed a theory of human behavior based on consequences ("operant conditioning"). "Behavior is shaped by what happens after it. If an action leads to something desirable, it's more likely to happen again. If it leads to something unpleasant, it's less likely." William Ward, *Schools of Psychology Step by Step: A Structured Guide to Major Psychological Theories and Thinkers* (TagVault, 2025), 48. Skinner ordered these behaviors with concepts such as "positive and negative reinforcement." He thought reinforcement was stronger than punishment. So, giving me coffee to help me do more work or offering me an incentive of higher pay (reinforcement) will be more likely to produce desired behavior than simply yelling at me when I don't perform work as expected (punishment). In this sense, Skinner put order to different sorts of human behavior and what causes them. This is the sort of "order" Powlison is talking about for all psychological and personality theories.

9. This "hierarchy of needs" was taught by Abraham Maslow (1908–1970). "Maslow pictured human needs and the motivations arising from them as a hierarchy or pyramid. Its broad base, on which all else rests, consists of the physiological needs; the next higher layer, of the safety needs (for security, stability, freedom from fear, and so on); still higher, of the psychological needs, which are largely of a social nature (the needs for belonging, love, affiliation, and acceptance; the needs for esteem, approval, and recognition); and finally, at the pinnacle, of the 'self-actualization needs' (the need to fulfill oneself, 'to become everything that one is capable of becoming.'" Ward, *The Schools of Psychology*, 581–582.

on the list. It's saying, "This is what really makes human beings tick. There's primary; there's secondary."

Conflict model. Another kind of model would be what we might call a conflict model, which says that there are different motives going on in people, and what really determines behavior is a conflict between some of them. Freudian theory would be a classic case where, in one sense, you've got a conflict between desire (including sexual desires) and a set of social motives that have to do with authority and strictures from outside us. So you get a conflict between morality and desire. And out of that conflict comes the basic structure for our motivations. Conflict becomes essential.¹⁰

Now, when you get into ego psychology, that brings in a third category.¹¹ We had desire, we had social motives, but then there can be a third factor of identity or self-actualization or "who I really am." The ego becomes a kind of mediating force between personal desires and social motives. But this is still a variation on the conflict model.

Hierarchy model. Another kind of model would be a hierarchy model. Think about humanistic psychology—for example, Abraham Maslow.¹² He would have the same list of motivations we've been examining, but he would just say, "Well, there's a hierarchy; there's a pyramid. And at the bottom are the physical needs, and then come the social needs, and then comes the self-actualization and the identity—finding out who you really are." And so you create a kind of pyramid. And whereas the behaviorist said the action is at the bottom of the pyramid in the building blocks, Maslow would say, "No, the action is at the top of the pyramid. That's what actually controls it." Again, they've got

10. People are often unaware of just how much a Freudian approach has infiltrated Western value systems. Whenever you witness people treating sexual fulfillment as the highest goal, you are witnessing Freud's theory at work. For background on this, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Crossway, 2020), 201–206.

11. According to the American Psychological Association, *ego psychology* is "an approach that emphasizes the functions of the ego in controlling impulses, planning, and dealing with the external environment." It is rooted in the thought of Sigmund Freud, who popularized the terms *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. The *id* is something "present from birth and operates entirely in the unconscious. The id contains the basic drives—hunger, sex, aggression, pleasure, avoidance of pain. It follows the pleasure principle, which means it wants immediate satisfaction, regardless of logic, social norms, or consequences." The *ego* "emerges to manage this chaos. It develops as a person interacts with the real world. . . . Its job is to mediate between the demands of the id, the rules of the superego, and realities of external life." Lastly, the *superego* "internalizes the voice of authority—parents, society, religion. It represents ideals, moral rules, and conscience." Ward, *Schools of Psychology*, 29–30.

12. See note 9. Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) was an American psychologist who taught that fulfilling innate human needs was the key to psychological health. A simple diagram of Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be found at <https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html>.

the same set of data but a completely different theoretical structure to order it and make some sense out of it.

Central model. I think one last kind of model would be a central model. And this might represent people who would say that social motives are central. For instance, you have social learning theorists or family systems theorists or any number of people who might say what's most important is the kind of desires for friendship and affiliation, desires for acceptance. Those kinds of things are *central*. Or someone like Viktor Frankl or Ernest Becker or other existentialists would say, "No, what's most important is the pursuit of meaning. Of all those motives we've got, meaning is the essential one. That's most important."¹³

You could run through other kinds of sociological theories as well. They might say that status is the most important—status anxiety is the real key dynamic. Or Marxism: economics is the most important. Out of all those human motives, economics is the central one; that's the one that can really explain why people do what they do. And again, every one of those theories is persuasive because to a certain extent every one of them is right. They're dealing with this list of data, of what we know motivates people. There's a certain plausibility to each of them.

A BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

What about the Scriptures? Here we are as Christians, and we see all this juicy stuff about what really makes people tick. How do *we* come at this data?

First of all, the Bible works with the exact same data. It recognizes all these motives that we've talked about. So as you think about Christianity and psychology, it's not as though we're living in a different world from secular psychologists. We're living in the same world. People are exactly the same. People do things, and they're moved by these motives in exactly the same way.

13. Viktor Frankl (1905–1997) "sat in a Nazi concentration camp and rebuilt a theory of life. He was a psychiatrist before the Holocaust, trained in both Freudian and Alderian psychology, but after surviving Auschwitz and other camps, he returned to Vienna with a different clarity: suffering is inevitable, but it's not meaningless. Frankl saw people stripped of everything—family, freedom, dignity. And yet some didn't collapse. They held onto something internal. For Frankl, that 'something' was meaning. His psychological system, logotherapy, is based on this core idea: humans are not driven primarily by pleasure (as Freud claimed) or power (as Adler argued), but by the need to find meaning in life. . . . Frankl believed that when people have a 'why,' they can endure almost any 'how.'" Ward, *Schools of Psychology*, 65. Ernest Becker (1924–1974) was an American cultural anthropologist known for his work on the fear of death and its influence on culture, psychology, and society. As with other psychologists, he was fascinated by what drives human behavior at its deepest level. He concluded that the awareness of our own mortality is the central motivator for much of what we do and think.

Just think about life sustenance issues in Matthew 6:25–33, about the birds of the field and the lilies that neither toil nor spin. And what does Jesus say in 6:32? He says, “Don’t be anxious about what you’ll eat, and what you’ll wear, and what you’ll drink.” See, there he’s talking about life sustenance issues. And he says, “The Gentiles seek all these things.” And there’s a motivational word: *seek*. That’s their goal. That’s what they’re after. They’re motivated to find these things. There’s a givenness that the Gentiles—i.e., people everywhere—seek these things, that seeking such things is a driving motive.

Or consider sexual motives. You know the Bible abounds in that—whether it’s Amnon, Tamar, Judah, or in a passage such as 1 Thessalonians 4:5, where again it says the Gentiles stake their life in the passion of lust. People everywhere are motivated and driven by these sexual desires.

And how about money and material things as motives? Think of Luke 16:14, which talks about those who love money. The Pharisees loved money. They were motivated by it; that’s what made their lives really move.

And then you have the social motivations. Think of the social desires for approval, to be liked and to have friends. John 12:42 talks about those who love the praise of men. People didn’t want to be kicked out of the synagogue. They didn’t want to be rejected. It controlled their behavior. That social motive is just assumed.

Or consider the areas of power, status, and success. Think of all those discussions Jesus has with his disciples when they come and say, “Who’s the greatest, and who’s going to be the success here?” They’re obviously motivated by that.

And then you have the motives relating to meaning in life. In a way, you could say the whole book of Ecclesiastes is about meaning. The first five chapters are really a treatise about a thousand things that people try to find meaning in. It’s got everything from gardening, to partying, to making a name for yourself and being important—all these things in which people really seek to find some kind of meaning.

And let’s not forget pleasure, the whole idea of a hedonistic structure—avoiding pain and finding pleasure. Again, Scripture is saturated with it. Consider the Parable of the Sower, where Jesus talks about the thorns. He mentions the riches and the cares and the pleasures of life—these things that affect people. The cares are the hard side that tends to obsess our minds, and we want to get away from them. The pleasures are the positive side that we tend to get ensnared with—the whole notion of desires or goals or needs or whatever we seek. You can find that built into the very structure of language.

A DIFFERENT ORDER

You've got the same observational data about motivations in both secular psychology and the Bible. But when you look at what the Bible does with that data, it does some very curious things. It's as though the Bible gives a two-sided structure to the data. For instance, in Matthew 6, it says, "The Gentiles seek all these things, but you seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness." In essence, "Instead of making these things rule you, as your idols, you live in relationship with God properly; you come to know God."¹⁴ And you can see that same two-sided structure all throughout our entire list of motives. With Ecclesiastes, for instance, after reading about all these things that people try to invest meaning in, you finally get to the end. And it says that the one thing in which meaning will come is this: fear God and keep his commandments. There's that sense again of *an essential life related to God*.¹⁵ That is the alternative to trying to find your meaning in futile things.

Look again at the motives of power and status and success. In Luke 22:24–27, the disciples were seeking a certain kind of power, and Jesus then defined power and success in completely different terms. He said that those things are going to come in other places: through serving, through laying down your life. Again, these are things that flow out of *a relationship with him*.¹⁶

The same happens with the social desires. Return to John 12:42 about loving the praise of men. That's followed in 12:43 by the praise of God as an alternative. Why? Because one's life is essentially God-related. The same goes

14. The truth that there is always something that rules us comes out repeatedly in Powlison's concept of "x-ray questions." These are questions that "aid in discerning the patterns of a person's motivation. The questions aim to help people identify the ungodly masters that occupy positions of authority in their hearts. These questions reveal 'functional gods,' what or who actually controls their particular actions, thoughts, emotions, attitudes, memories, and anticipations." *Seeing with New Eyes*, 130. Here are some example x-ray questions: What do you love or hate? What do you want or crave? What do you seek, aim for, or pursue? Where do you bank your hopes? What do you fear? What do you feel like doing? What do you think you need? What makes you tick (what sun does your planet revolve around)? Where do you find refuge, safety, and comfort? What or whom do you trust? Whose performance matters? Whom must you please? These questions and others can be found on pages 132–140 of *Seeing with New Eyes*.

15. "There is no 'psychodynamic,' no motivation pattern, independent of what people are doing with God. Human psychology is theological because human beings are with-respect-to-God creatures. The prime action is in the man-God relationship, not in an encapsulated psyche whose component parts relate to one another according to some supposed pattern. What goes on in the psyche expresses and registers man-with-God dynamics, not some supposedly independent psychic structure, conflict, or need." *The Biblical Counseling Movement*, 243–244.

16. In the context of suffering, David would write, "The living faith that embraces Christ is formed in the crucible of weakness. The courage to carry on and the strong love that cares well for others are formed in the crucible of struggle." *God's Grace in Your Suffering*, 91.

for the love for money. Luke 16:13 says you can't serve both God and money. And, again, you get that two-sided structure where *either* these things are the ruling motives *or* God is the basis of what controls you in your life.¹⁷

It's almost as though a secular psychologist, because of ruling God out from the start, is trying to understand what's going on in a chess game with black and white pieces, but all the white pieces are invisible to him. He's wearing glasses, in a sense, that make the white pieces invisible. So, he's seeing all this stuff going on with the other pieces, and he's trying to make sense out of the black pieces by only looking at the black pieces by themselves. In light of that, some of these psychologists will take up a hierarchy model, and they'll say that the queen is the most important, and the others are less. And some love a building block model, where pawns are foundational to everything else. And others love a conflict model, where there's a kind of tension between kings and queens. Or someone who really thinks that bishops are great will think that the bishop is the most important one. What are all these psychologists doing? They're trying to make sense out of human behavior and motives by just looking at one side of the board.¹⁸ And then when you look at what the Scripture does, all of a sudden you see, "Oh, yes! All these things are two-sided. There's a whole other option. There's a whole other world of motivation which makes sense out of this exact same data."

One of the beauties of that is this: As we see human behavior that way, we realize that the data, which is at the very heart of secular psychology, is something that is also at the heart of a Christian view of motivation, of a biblical view. And things like our relationship with God or coming under the lordship of Christ or letting the gospel rule our hearts—these things are not suggesting Christians have some kind of sixth finger on their hand. But rather the Bible is saying that instead of being motivated by these common things, we are increasingly being motivated by this other reality. And instead of being idolaters, we are people who are living by faith. Instead of living like those under the power of the world, the flesh, and the devil—understood in essentially motivational

17. One of the biblical tools we can use to examine our motives is Jesus's teaching about the greatest commandment: to love God with all that is in us (heart, mind, soul, and strength) and to love our neighbor as ourselves. When our *primary* motive shifts away from these, sin is crouching at the door.

18. This is a brilliant insight. People who remove God from their interpretation of life are *unable* to understand it. They treat fundamental evils (the world, the flesh, and the devil) as non-existent. That means (1) they cannot make sense out of the suffering they experience, and (2) they misinterpret what's happening around them and to them. In the chess metaphor, it becomes impossible for them to win the game because they do not know what they are fighting and where victory is found.

terms—we are people who are coming into the lordship of Jesus Christ. Same data; completely different structures. Christianity isn't externalism or internalism; Christianity is the lights going on so that we see a whole other set of pieces on the chess board.

CONCLUSIONS FOR BIBLICAL THOUGHT

Let me make a few summary comments based on our discussion.

First, there's an unquestioned givenness to the things that secular psychologists study. We cannot doubt that people are really motivated by all these things. The Bible doesn't doubt it. Common sense doesn't doubt it. That's really true. The things that theorists study are really what move people.¹⁹

Second, as we look at the biblical theory, there's a different structure. And that structure comes out in several ways. One is a kind of *antithesis structure*.²⁰ You are either motivated to seek your bodily sustenance, or you are motivated by God's kingdom. It's an *either/or*. You're either motivated in an adulterous way with your sexuality, or you're motivated in a godly way to give to others.

Third, there's a priority structure. It's not just the godly way versus the idolatrous way, but it's that these things—these motivations we've seen—are all meant to be under something else. So it's, "Seek *first* God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these will be added to you as well." There's a certain priority to it. You'll notice, for example, that Jesus is spoken of as one who "grew in wisdom and favor and stature with God and man" (Luke 2:52). There are places where he was admired and approved by people. That was a good

19. This, in part, is why secular psychologists and psychiatrists have helped people. In God's common grace, they are attempting to confront what's really there. In a list of "affirmations and denials" at the end of *Speaking Truth in Love*, Powlison writes, "We *deny* that secular disciplines and professions are entirely benighted by the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic effects of sin. The operations of God's common grace can cause unbelievers to be relatively observant, caring, stimulating, and informative." *Speaking Truth in Love*, 175.

20. The concept of *antithesis* comes from Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987), who taught apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary and whose teachings Powlison was exposed to when he studied there. In simple terms, the antithesis is a two-color coding for the heart—let's make it yellow or blue. Every single human heart is either yellow or blue. There's no green in the middle. In the yellow is every heart of a sinful outsider. Theologians use the language here of being "in Adam" (1 Cor. 15:21–22, vs. being "in Christ") or being a "covenant breaker." We might also use the language of relationship: a relationship saboteur. In the blue is every heart of a redeemed insider, recipients of grace through Christ. The language used is that of being "in Christ" or a "covenant keeper." Every person has either a yellow heart or a blue one. For background, see Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *Insider-Outsider: How God Makes Insiders from Outsiders & Helps Us Talk about Our Faith* (Pub. by the author, 2022), chapter 11, "The Antithesis."

thing. But you'll also notice in his life that he did not finally serve the desire to be approved by men. There's some motive over it. So there's a kind of priority structure in place.

Fourth, one of the things this priority structure means is that all of these motivations we've been looking at are not bad per se. They're only bad when they somehow run out of control. When they're put under the umbrella, so to speak, they're actually good. The goodness of the things that motivate people—whether it's sex or power or money or social approval or finding yourself or having meaning in life—are all looked at in the Bible *as* good things. They are gifts of God. And what makes them evil is only when the gifts are pursued without the Giver, when you seek the goods of God without the good One who gives those goods. That makes human motivation go off into disarray and chaos.²¹

Fifth, God gives all of these things sooner or later. When you look at the portrayals of what life with God is and what heaven is like, you will find things which, either at the level of metaphor or literalness, have to do with food and feasting and marriage feasts. They have to do with incredible intimacy and closeness. They have to do with power and status. So, after Jesus says, "The world's leaders seek power and authority, but you're supposed to serve," he then adds, "You will sit on thrones in my kingdom." In the end, his followers will be given glory. But it's all as a gift, as a byproduct of making God central to one's motives. Run through the entire list of motives, and you will find that God gives each of these sooner or later. Some of them we receive in this life in a partial way. All of them are included in the way that heaven itself is described.

CODE WORDS FOR MOTIVATION

Let me close with this. One of the things that I have found very helpful about thinking in these terms involves what we might call "code words." A lot of words for Christian folks become code words. They become mysterious, symbolical words, and it's really hard to get a handle on what they mean in everyday experience. Phrases such as "the flesh" or "the lusts of the flesh," or "idolatry," or being "earthly minded" versus "heavenly minded," or the phrases "the world,

21. Powlison is essentially talking about idolatry. When we take good things and make them god-things, we fashion idols for ourselves. Sex, money, and relationships can all be windows through which we experience the goodness and grace of God. But if we pursue these things selfishly and without any attempt to honor God as Lord, then we have idols. And then we start to resemble what we idolize.

the flesh, and the devil.” Those can become symbolical words, words that we as Christians use, where we ourselves often don’t tie them very tangibly to what real life is like. And especially for outsiders, they can seem like mystifying, confusing words.

But each of those words is about *motivation*. That’s what they’re talking about. What is “the lust of the flesh”? Well, that’s what I’m like if I only consider my life in terms of what I can touch and see and feel. It’s the fact that I’m going to want comfort, sexual satisfaction, money, status, food. I’m going to want to feel good. That’s the lust of the flesh. It’s something mainstream, not some kind of weird theological category.

Or “earthly minded.” What does that mean? It’s the exact same thing. Being earthly minded is simply living in the light of that whole list of motivations and having them be what’s controlling our lives rather than living in the light of our relationship with Christ.

What about “idolatry”? Again, that’s one of those words that, in the twentieth century, is very hard for people to grasp. Idolatry takes things of the creation, God’s gifts, and makes them our gods. It makes them things that control our lives. The ads you see around you play to idolatry. They create idolatry. And as soon as you realize that, you can take a potentially mystifying biblical word and see how it maps onto a central set of issues for the human heart and motivation.